Library services for indigenous societies in Latin America

Edgardo Civallero
edgardocivallero@gmail.com

Abstract

Library services for indigenous societies in Latin America have been explored and implemented since the late 90s of the past century. From a LIS perspective, theory and methodology on this particular topic still need to be built and developed, and the experiences themselves need to be thoroughly collected, examined, systematized and divulgated; however, their potential importance in the continent's LIS scenario has been already recognized, especially considering the high number of users that may benefit from such services in countries like Mexico, Guatemala, Peru or Bolivia.

Even if most of these experiences are now over, some of them are still in place — and all of them have something to teach to future generations of LIS professionals, both inside and outside the continent. This paper presents some of them.

Introduction

According to IFLA/UNESCO Public Library Manifesto (1994), "the services of the public library are provided on the basis of equality of access for all, regardless of age, race, sex, religion, nationality, language or social status. Specific services and materials must be provided for those users who cannot, for whatever reason, use the regular services and materials, for example linguistic minorities, people with disabilities or people in hospital or prison."

Nevertheless, for reasons ranging from economy of means to plain and simple discrimination, public libraries seldom meet the needs of particular groups. Among

these groups there are indigenous societies and other groups labeled as "minorities" (social, linguistic, economic, racial, ethnic, etc., not necessarily demographic).

Historically, most Latin American First Nations have been subjugated, subjected to all kinds of pressures, injustices and mistreatment. The socio-economic conditions in which they subsist are often far from acceptable, and the problems they face on a daily basis can hardly be imagined by the rest of their fellow citizens. They were victims of the colonial powers, and their dispossession continued under the independent, republican governments: they suffered their genocidal destruction and after that, their policies of pacification, acculturation and assimilation. Aboriginal peoples that survived to this day have done so with their intangible heritage significantly diminished. Although damaged here and there, some of these peoples still have solid social fabrics which have allowed them to overcome many difficulties and to experience important changes without renouncing their identities and cultures. They have preserved their languages, values, memories, and ideas, and have incorporated new elements and modified some of the old ones to better respond to their current needs.

However, the situation of most of the indigenous societies in Latin America is quite the opposite: the collapse of their social structures, the stripping of their native identities and the deliberate attacks against their cultures are alarming processes leading, almost inevitably, to their disappearance as societies, as well as to the loss of their languages and their knowledge. The latter implies a rapid decline in cultural diversity, and the subsequent impoverishment of our increasingly homogeneous and monochrome world heritage.

In this complex and difficult context, library services for indigenous societies have been timidly explored and implemented in Latin America since the late 90s of the past century. A few of them have been documented; unfortunately, most of them have gone mostly unnoticed or are yet to be reported.

Generally speaking, the initial goal of these experiences was to provide basic, day-to-day information services to populations traditionally neglected by public libraries. However, early attempts to do so soon made librarians aware of the importance of broadening objectives, especially after witnessing the reality of indigenous peoples in Latin America. They realized that library services —and the information they manage— could play a significant role in reducing the huge gap between civil society at large and aboriginal groups, as well as in addressing the many inequalities, challenges and barriers the latter have to face and endure. It soon became clear that library services

for indigenous societies should fight against exclusion, encourage literacy and disseminate relevant information and strategic knowledge, promote lifelong learning and inclusive education, reduce inequalities, promote inclusive societies... In addition, libraries' structures, strategies and techniques could be used, among many other things, to restore oral tradition and history, to support endangered languages and intangible heritages, and to foster bilingual education.

Since the late 80s and the early 90s of the past century, urgent information needs have been detected and identified among indigenous communities in all Latin American countries with native populations; some of them were collected in IFLA's Project Report #22 (2003). The solutions proposed and adopted were limited and transitional, and were implemented at a local level and on a small scale. In many ways those solutions were exploratory, since there was no previous research and knowledge librarians could refer to. Unfortunately, most of them lacked proper funding and official support; they were hindered by unclear definition of problems and inappropriate approaches; and most of them were not properly documented. Nevertheless, they happened to be quite useful to evaluate potential responses to indigenous information needs and, most importantly, to realize how much is still to be learnt and done within Library and Information Sciences regarding "non-standard" users and services.

Examples' selection

Experiences with library services for indigenous populations in America Latina may be roughly divided into two groups. On the one hand, libraries working in indigenous areas which do not provide specific services to their users. On the other, libraries which do provide specific services to native populations according to their particular needs and traits, inside or outside indigenous areas.

Within the first group, there are libraries that have materials or develop activities somehow related to the culture and the language of the community they serve. One of them is the library of Paxixil, a community of the Maya Kaqchikel people located in the municipality of Tecpán (department of Chimaltenango), in the highlands of southern Guatemala. It is part of a network of 3 rural libraries supported by an NGO, which are run by young people from the communities themselves. It provides both books/documents and space for educational and cultural projects, e.g. those related to public health. The Paxixil library building designs, intended to imitate the colorful

textile patterns of the Mayan, were drafted by a famous Guatemalan architect who donated them to the NGO; the library itself provides service to 200 people.

Another example is La Casa del Pueblo (The People's House), in the community of Guanacas (municipality of Inzá, department of Cauca), in southern Colombia. It serves several rural communities, some of them belonging to the Paez or Nasa people; however, as the previous one, the services are not indigenous-oriented. The building designs were also donated by a couple of young architects, and the library was built by local people in one year.

Worth mentioning is the Network of Rural Libraries in the department of Cajamarca, in the Andes of northern Peru. This network —one of the best examples of socially committed work in the continent— has made a huge change for peasants by supporting small libraries in rural, mostly indigenous communities, since 1971. Even if their services are not primarily focused on indigenous societies, their users belong mostly to the Quechua people, making it necessary for these small libraries to know their users' language and culture.

Other experiences include the public library of Lluthuka, at the village of Colimba (department of Nariño), beloging to the Pasto people, and the "house of knowledge" Ala Kusreik Ya at the village of Guambía (department of Cauca), belonging to the Misak or Guambiano people, both in southern Colombia, and the Pawanka library at Wampusirpe (department of Gracias a Dios), in eastern Honduras, providing services to Miskito, Tawahka and Pech peoples.

In the second group, maybe one of the finest examples is the library at CIFMA, in the outskirts of the city of Presidencia Roque Sáenz Peña (province of Chaco), in north-eastern Argentina. CIFMA is a center committed to training young teachers of the Qom, Wichi and Moqoit peoples, so they can perform a key role in intercultural bilingual education programs in primary schools in Chaco. The library collects everything published in the native languages, and is open to both the people studying there, and the community. In the same province, the so-called "Bibliotecas del Monte" (Forest libraries) provide services to Wichi people that continue to live in small, isolated communities in the middle of the woods.

Another excellent example is the Magüta Library of the Tikuna people, in the village of Benjamin Constant (state of Amazonas), in western Brazil, where the Javari and Solimões rivers meet. Since 1998 this center has been managed by the General Council

of the Tikuna People, and serves both as a museum and a space for recovering memory, and as a training center for teachers (as CIFMA does in Argentina). Other experiences worth mentioning in this second group are the small libraries created in the "Escolas da floresta" (Forest schools) in the states of Acre and Amazonas, western Brazil; the Guarani School Library at Tekoá Itaty (municipality of Palhoça, state of Santa Catarina), in southern Brazil, providing service to Guaraní people; and the small, self-managed library Mogeleam Kimün in Temuco (Araucania region), in southern Chile, created by Mapuche people.

Old or discontinued projects include, among many others, the Popular Ethnic Library Qomlaqtaq in Rosario (province of Santa Fe, eastern Argentina), which served Qom people that migrated from Chaco to the poverty belt of a big city; the Ñimi Quimün Mapuche and Indigenous Library in General Roca (province of Rio Negro, southern Argentina), a joint initiative between an urban indigenous community of the Mapuche people and a local university; the libraries of indigenous organizations in Bolivia (e.g. APCOB, CIPCA, CIDOB, CEDIB, THOA, IDR, and CEPA), which have provided strong support to indigenous social and political movements; the libraries in the Guajira region, in northern Colombia, devoted to the Wayuu people; the Mapuche mobile library supported by the DIBAM (Direction of Libraries, Archives and Museums) and the Universidad de la Frontera, which travelled through several indigenous, rural communities in southern Chile; the Center of Indigenous Documentation (Institute of Indigenous Studies, University of La Frontera) in Temuco, also in southern Chile, and also related to the Mapuche people; a large number of poorly documented experiences in Mexico and Guatemala, with Mayan and Nahuan peoples (e.g. PROBIGUA project and the experiences with "bunkos"); the "river libraries" created to serve forest indigenous peoples in eastern Peru, and the remarkable boat libraries in Venezuela, which worked in the Orinoco basin during the 90s; the many libraries collecting indigenous materials in Ecuadorian eastern lowlands, and a long etcetera.

Points to be learnt

From the joint work of Latin American librarians and native communities during the last two decades trying to carry out and sustain a number of library initiatives, several important, valuable lessons can be extracted. They might be structured around five core ideas or principles— ideas that should guide future actions or, at least, become the ground for next generations of LIS professionals to continue researching, learning,

and moving forward in the development of strategies both inside and outside Latin America.

1. Libraries are *for all*. In plural societies —and few in today's world are not— this implies, among many other things, responding to the requirements and the characteristics of people with very different cultural traits. Therefore, it is necessary to design, develop and implement relevant library services for all potential users, including those who have been systematically under-served, ignored or directly excluded so far — and which may need extra attention.

2. Labels may be dangerous. Library activities, initiatives and projects for multicultural, indigenous, rural and/or "minority" communities all around the world have been named by using a number of labels. Such labeling might have led to exclusion rather than inclusion, and to further marginalize already disadvantaged, vulnerable individuals and groups. Several forms of domination revolve around the construction of "the others", and labels are an essential part of that process. Having this is mind, except for those cases where labels are used by the communities themselves to address their identity issues and to support their claims and struggles, differences should not be highlighted in library spaces and services, neither by labeling nor by any other means. That is not the same as ignoring or negating them — they exist and should be taken into account. But they should not be used as "marks".

3. Beware of stereotypes and prejudices. They are present within all plural societies, especially regarding minority groups. They are an undesirable byproduct of maintaining and reinforcing identity within complex human groups, as well as a consequence of the attempt to establish boundaries between different identities. When designing libraries and planning their services, it is necessary to undertake a critical self-assessment to recognize and unlearn any existing mis- and preconceptions. While it is essential to consider relevant cultural factors in the design of libraries and library services, old and new prejudices and stereotypes (e.g. cultural stereotypes related to indigenous peoples) must be subjected to critical scrutiny, and overcome.

4. Beware of cultural colonialism. Together with schools, libraries are powerful tools for spreading a certain set of knowledge, cultural traits and values. Libraries are heavily influenced by dominant cultures, which have their own narratives and models, and tend to subordinate all stories and voices that collide with their particular worldviews. When designing library services, acculturation processes and socio-cultural pressures need to be carefully examined, addressed and challenged. One of the many solutions is

to mix and match "conventional" library structures with local frameworks for storing, organizing and sharing knowledge, as well as with other information formats and cultural expressions.

5. Inclusiveness, trust, respect and sustainability should be among libraries' core elements. Services' design should be respectful of the final users' needs and possibilities, and lead to sustainable results. The community's library-related requirements should be met by mobilizing support at grassroots level: communities need to be involved in identifying problems, suggesting solutions and improvements, and developing strategies. Besides being "appropriated" by the community, the library and its services need to be sustainable over time: a library should not continuously keep reinventing itself, but focus its efforts on maintaining and improving its services.

Some final remarks

Despite their uneven development and implementation, and despite varying widely in scope, approach, concepts and results, Latin American library projects serving indigenous societies have become a reference for Library and Information Sciences, at least at a regional level. They identified new horizons to be explored, and exposed significant problems and shortages in library services regarding aboriginal groups, especially in public libraries.

They also brought out the need for developing LIS categories and frames as well as methodological tools in order to better address those groups' issues and needs. Systematizing the regional experiences and drawing lessons from them is another pending task, which might be built on the work already done in other latitudes, e.g. Oceania and North America.

There is a huge amount of research and fieldwork still to be done. And continued dialogue is essential to move forward: dialogue between librarians, and between library and community — but, more importantly, between librarians and users. The latter is essential to find out what users really need.

Maybe those final users need a library to support their claims for social justice and human rights, as happens in Guatemala with Maya communities, in Colombia with displaced peoples, in northern Peru and southern Chile with rural communities fighting against mining and timbering multi-nationals...

Maybe they need help to recover their endangered languages and cultures, as happens in the Delta Amacuro in Venezuela or in Brazilian Amazonia, or even in northeastern Argentina and eastern Paraguay.

Maybe they don't need —or don't want— anything a library can provide them.

In the end, it is not about creating "indigenous libraries", spaces made "for indigenous peoples only" that will eventually become new ghettos. Nor about perpetuating and maintaining an idea of "indigenous knowledge" (or simply an idea of what is "indigenous") which is the result of cultural stereotype. It is about designing library tools, methods and services useful to libraries (public, school, popular, community, peasant, or rural libraries, created or to be created, in aboriginal areas or far from them) that have indigenous groups or individuals among their users; libraries that wish to respond to the particular information needs of these users but at the same time, seek to open the native culture to others in an inclusive way. It is about supporting histories and identities, while at the same time eliminating barriers between "the ones" and "the others", rethinking certain "-isms", and assuming a current reality of mixed societies and knowledge, fostering exchanges and learning.

Whatever the initial requirements, whatever the final results, close collaboration has to be set up from the start, and librarians should be as open-minded and as committed as possible. Because reality happens to be far more complex than textbooks and official guidelines make it out to be.

And also much more exciting, full of challenges and lessons, as the work undertaken so far in Latin America suggests.

Author's bibliography

Ancient cultures in modern universes. *Ariadne*, 54, pp. 1-16. https://www.aacademica.org/edgardo.civallero/2.pdf

Bibliotecas indígenas en América Latina: Revisión bibliográfica y estado actual de la cuestión. Córdoba (Argentina): Wayrachaki editora, 2008. https://www.aacademica.org/edgardo.civallero/10.pdf

Indigenous libraries, utopia and reality: Proposing an Argentine model. *World Library and Information Congress - 70th IFLA General Conference and Council*. Buenos Aires: IFLA: 2004. https://www.aacademica.org/edgardo.civallero/61.pdf

Indigenous oral tradition in southern Latin America: A library's effort to save sounds and stories from silence. *World Library and Information Congress - 73rd IFLA General Conference and Council*. Durban (South Africa): IFAL, 2007. https://www.aacademica.org/edgardo.civallero/103.pdf

Libraries and aboriginal medicine: Experiences in Argentina. *World Library and Information Congress - 72nd IFLA General Conference and Council. Information Resources in Traditional Medicine Satellite Meeting*. Seoul: IFLA, 2006. https://www.aacademica.org/edgardo.civallero/25.pdf

Libraries and indigenous peoples in Latin America. *TRIM – Trends in Information Management*, 3 (2), 2007, pp. 76-98. https://www.aacademica.org/edgardo.civallero/71.pdf

Libraries, indigenous peoples, identity and inclusion. *World Library and Information Congress - 73rd IFLA General Conference and Council*. Durban (South Africa): IFLA, 2007. https://www.aacademica.org/edgardo.civallero/35.pdf

Qadede Idá?at: Ancient tradition running through the family. *World Library and Information Congress - 72nd IFLA General Conference and Council*. Seoul: IFLA, 2006. https://www.aacademica.org/edgardo.civallero/90.pdf

Tribal health in school libraries: Oral tradition and cultural expression. *World Library and Information Congress - 73rd IFLA General Conference and Council*. Durban (South Africa): IFLA, 2007. https://www.aacademica.org/edgardo.civallero/98.pdf

When the [knowledge] ditch is dug by our own hands: Libraries, indigenous peoples, and strategic information. In Charbonneau, D. (ed.). *Global Information Inequalities: Bridging the Information Gap*. Oxford (UK): Chandos, 2008. https://www.aacademica.org/edgardo.civallero/114.pdf

Other bibliography

IFLA (1994). *IFLA/UNESCO Public Library Manifesto*. [Online]. https://www.ifla.org/publications/iflaunesco-public-library-manifesto-1994

IFLA-LAC (2003). *Acceso a los servicios bibliotecarios y de información en los pueblos indígenas de América Latina*. Lima: IFLA-LAC, CAAAP.